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Toga and Dagger

Long, long before there was a CIA or a KGB there were the frumentarii of Rome, and before them an array of other spooks, assassins and covert actors.

Intelligence-gathering is as old as civilization. From the beginning, when men began to keep historical records, exploits of espionage have gone hand in hand with accounts of armies and the foreign policies of nations. Unfortunately, we sometimes act today as if the questions raised by such activities as spying and covert action were being raised for the first time. Our foreign policy—and our intelligence gathering—might profit from study of what has gone before.

Although the Bible has dozens of references to the use of spies to search out unknown lands or to infiltrate enemy camps, the first civilization that attempted political expansion on a large scale and had a bureaucracy well organized enough to handle an intelligence service was Egypt. The ancient Egyptians were experts in both military and diplomatic spying. Their "empire" extended as far as Syria, and they kept control over the minor kings farther north and east.

The Assyrians were the next people to develop an intelligence service. They added to the Egyptian system the physical installation that would make transmission of information much easier. They built a magnificent road system for their messengers and soldiers to travel on, kept it in good repair and put it under the protection of a special deity. News of revolution could be transmitted to the capital amazingly fast. An internal security system was also set up to ensure the loyalty and efficiency of all royal officials.

The Persians made other improvements on this sytem. The King's "eye" was the head of the royal intelligence service, and his network of "eyes and ears" kept watch on all local officials. Special commissioners toured the provinces making sure that the government machinery functioned properly.

These early eastern cultures represent a well-developed tradition of centrally organized intelligence gathering. They were developed under absolute monarchies and each built upon the developments of its predecessors. Rulers were concerned with their own survival in the face of domestic and foreign threats, and intelligence gathering and internal spying were the methods they used to control their subjects. They were never plagued with debates over the rights of individuals and were either unaware of or uninterested in the social and economic welfare of the general population.

The first exception to this pattern was Greece—a civilization noted for many things, but not for centralization. The fact that the Greeks were so impressed by the Persian system suggests that they had nothing to compare, and, indeed, it seems that although they admired the system, they did not copy it. That is not to say the Greeks were strangers to espionage. The Greek word for spy, *skopos*, appears throughout classical literature from Homer to Polybius, and the existence of spies is well-attested in both literary and historical sources.

But intelligence failures stand out vividly in Greek history. At Aegospotami in 405 B.C., for example, the Athenian fleet, returning from an encounter with the Spartan enemy, failed to post a scout by its ships when it disembarked. A Spartan spy reported this and enabled the Spartans to destroy the entire Athenian fleet. The lack of a scout brought the Pelopponesian war to an end in a single night.

Counterintelligence, too, was well understood by the Greeks. They were very concerned with keeping information from leaking to the enemy. Alexander the Great censored his army's mail, and all generals knew that marching orders were to be given at the last moment, and then only to commanders. The instructions on what to do with enemy spies when they were caught is quite explicit—kill them. This rule was broken only when the spy could be used for propaganda purposes. When Xerxes caught a spy in his camp, he conducted him on a tour to display the obvious superiority of his own forces.

When Polybius, in a well-known passage, complained of the treachery and deceit of warfare in his own day, he must have been exaggerating, because although the Greeks never developed a central intelligence organization, spying had become a practiced art very early in Greek history both as a way of war and a way of life.

Finally we come to Rome, the Mediterranean power noted for its organizational ability and that eventually occupied most of the territories just discussed. We might imagine that the Romans would have learned from and copied the traditions of the East, but the truth is, they did not. Rome certainly needed an intelligence service; its early history is a series of continuous wars with neighboring tribes—the Etruscans, the Samnites and most dangerous of all, the Gauls. In all these encounters the Romans seem to have been caught singularly unprepared. The invasion of the Gauls in 90 B.C. for example, took them totally by surprise. Only the cackling of the geese in the city woke the Roman defenders in time to drive the Gauls down from the city walls. Livy tells us that on an occasion when the Etruscans were making a raid, the Romans learned about it only when the peasants came stampeding in from the fields to hide within the city walls. On another occasion, the city learned of a victorious battle when the waters of the Tiber brought the shields of fallen enemies inside the city walls. Whatever truth we may attribute to these stories (and it may be none), the fact remains that even in their myths, the Romans did not portray themselves as "all-knowing." Instead a picture emerges of the straightforward Roman peasant who looked with disdain on anything that appeared artificial or disingenuous.

The Romans rarely if ever placed special agents among allied tribes, but instead simply left it entirely to their allies to keep them informed of events that might endanger them both. This would work only as long as the ally thought it was in his best interest to keep Rome informed. When the tribe became hostile to Rome, the system simply collapsed. It seemed to run on *fides Romana*—Roman fidelity to its allies.

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While Rome was certainly not as naive as these stories often make it appear, the absence of an intelligence service is still striking in a power about to become a world empire.

As long as Rome was fighting the disunited tribes of Italy, the system of relying on allies was adequate, but when it faced an enemy with a well-developed intelligence service of its own, the results were disastrous. The Carthaginians, who were well-informed on the subject of eastern tradecraft, were able to use this knowledge time and time again on the battlefield against Rome.

The Romans eventually developed an agency that really deserves the title of secret service. It came into existence shortly after 100 A.D. and was probably founded by the Emperor Domitian. What he did was to reorganize the G4, or supply section, of the imperial general staff and turn it into an intelligence service. The secret service was thus staffed by supply sergeants whose original function had been the distribution of grain (*frumentum*) to the troops —which was how they came to be called *frumentarii*. Their main duties were as couriers, tax collectors and policemen. In their capacity as messengers, they superficially resembled the "eyes and ears" of the Persian king. They were used as spies against members of the imperial court by even the "good" emperors such as Hadrian. Prominent generals as well as lowly Christians were the object of their attention, and they were commissioned to carry out political assassinations.

By the time of the emperor Septimius Severus, peasants in Asia Minor were complaining bitterly about the arbitrary arrests and tax-gouging practiced by these men and their associates. The temptation for them to exceed their powers, especially in financial matters, must have been great. One inscription from Asia Minor honors a *centurion frumentarius* who did NOT oppress the provincials in spite of his ability to do so. Their snooping and corruption became so unbearable that contemporary descriptions portray them as little more than a plundering army. But in all fairness, they would have been disliked even if they had all been honest. Roman administration at its best was often impersonal or arbitrary, and at its worst inhumane; the unpopularity of their work was unavoidable.

When Diocletian disbanded the *frumentarii* he knew that they would have to be replaced by a new intelligence-gathering operation. His solution was to reorganize the service into a civilian operation called the *agentes in rebus*. These agents were placed in all imperial bureaus to spy on their superiors, much like the Soviet political commissars. They were now undisguised as the strong arm of a total police state.

The two most striking characteristics of the Roman intelligence service were how late it developed and its seeming lack of innovation. When you compare the books of Vegetius and Frontinus with the earlier Greek handbooks on war and generalship, you immediately see that very little new had been developed by the Romans. What the Romans should have done was place agents among neighboring tribes to monitor events and report to the frontier station. Instead, they preferred to sit behind their massive defenses and rely on their allies to inform them about the barbarians moving closer and closer. After all those years, Rome was still using the primitive system of *fides Romana* when faith in Rome was becoming a rare commodity.

It is ironic that with all the opportunities to borrow from the East, Rome did not do so, and that with all of Rome's ability for organization, an intelligence system was not one of the things it organized. The ultimate tragedy is, of course, that what intelligence activity did take place was not directed against Rome's real enemies but was turned on its own citizens in an orgy of self-scrutiny at the hands of corrupt and paranoid emperors.

Why is the study of historical intelligence important? Because it makes intelligence professionals, historians and the general public aware of the very ancient roots of this profession. In recent years the intelligence community has come under such scathing criticism that its necessity has been questioned and its very existence has been threatened. Considering the long tradition from which it has developed and its undeniable importance, its disappearance seems unlikely. Its necessity should be self-evident.

Tradecraft may have changed with new technologies, but the philosophical dilemma raised by its uses have not. The relationship between covert action and foreign policy is still hotly debated in Congress as is the role of an intelligence services in a democracy. Certainly the debate could not be hurt by a fuller knowledge of historical parallels on the part of the participants; we need not repeat clichés about historical lessons that can be learned about the study of the past.

We in the West consider ourselves the cultural descendants of those Greeks and Romans who chose not to develop an intelligence service because they saw it as contrary to their political tradition. Yet we find ourselves pitted against a Russian state that sees itself as heir to the eastern tradition, via the Byzantine Empire, which never questioned the right of rulers to suppress individual freedom for reasons of state or tolerated debate over the morality of covert action.

With academia and the intelligence profession trying to bridge the gap which has separated them since the end of World War II, historical intelligence would be a good meeting ground. This type of research should not be hindered by scholars who see espionage as an amusing sideline nor by intelligence people who think antiquity is too far removed to matter anymore. The debate has never been more timely, the consequences never more severe.

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